

As stray and bewildered in Oototol's world

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Paintings by the artist known as Oototol¹ seem to be teaching us mystifying lessons, the importance of which inheres, paradoxically, in our inability to understand them. The graphic clarity of Oototol's black-and-white paintings belies their compositional and allegorical complexity: The more attentively I look at these images, the more I become bewildered. The fact that so little biographical information is known about the artist, and none of his writing or words are known to survive, only protracts this puzzlement. Yet the experience of bewilderment summoned by these works is generative and enlightening. Might Oototol's paintings be teaching us to be comfortable in the commotion of confusion? Might they suggest some possibilities for encountering art without recourse to conventional tools and methods like biography and iconography? Could Oototol play a part in gently guiding "Southeast Asia [to] revisit the address of whatever art history it has known"?²

In this essay, I will approach the artist's works as lessons, or as vehicles to think with and imagine alongside. Although writing on the artist is scant, hitherto it

has predominantly focused on Oototol's relationship with Murni and the other artists with whom he lived and worked from the 1990s until his passing in 2008.³ Commentators have discussed the affinities between his works and the canon of Balinese painting, and with Indonesian history more broadly.⁴ They have focused on the sources for the bizarre imagery in his paintings, and the circumstances in which he made them. This positivist and historicist bent in prior commentary provides a basis enabling me to pursue other lines of inquiry here, which are more speculative in tenor and stay closer to the paintings themselves, and to the bewilderment they summon.⁵ In part, my approach here is facilitated by my position as something of an outsider, coming to these works (and to this bewilderment) from a distance that is geographical, temporal, and linguistic. Whereas Indonesian words for *bewildered*—which are derived from the Malay *bingung*—tend to connote a confusion derived from mental disarray or even deficient intelligence, in English, the word *bewildered* invokes not stupidity but rather the stupendousness of the wilderness, or of ecology in its untamed (and perhaps untamable) majesty. The etymology of the English word, *bewildered*, lies in a now-obsolete word, *wilder*, which means "to lead astray." In what follows, I surrender to Oototol's paintings; I let them lead me astray. Three ideas serve as wayfinders as I attempt to learn from these works: notions of *kinship*, *self-birth*, and the figure of the *stray*.⁶

Kinship

I will begin with the concept of kinship, and with a painting in which two affable cows dominate the image [Image A].⁷ Although the cows are turned away from each other, their rumps are rubbing together, with the kind of easy and intimate closeness we might more usually associate with friends, lovers, and family. The coarse hair coating the leather on both cows has been carefully rendered with fine lines, individually

applied with delicate brushstrokes in neatly spaced rows. This detail affirms the tactility of the cows and suggests that Oototol may perhaps have been a person accustomed to caressing animals, feeling the texture of their warm bodies, and thereby learning from them with all his senses, including through his fingertips. The cow on the right appears to be grazing on the leaves of a plant; the same kind of vegetation appears no fewer than nine times in the painting, implying an ample abundance of food for the animals. Meanwhile, the cow on the left is revealing its tongue. Perhaps it might be exploring its environment or searching for sustenance. Or perhaps— noting the bovine tongue's proximity to the human figure in the lower left corner of the canvas—the cow might be gently grooming this person, with the kind of tenderness and care we associate with friends, lovers, and family.

The cows and the humans, in this image, seem to share a familiarity and affection, perhaps even a kind of interspecies kinship. Scholars discussing the relationship between humans and other animals have invested special importance in this "powerful kinship," which Barbara Creed posits may undermine the myth of "the human animal as exceptional amongst all living creatures."⁸ Indeed, the human figures here—five of them, all dressed in a uniform and nearly identical in appearance, as is typical of Oototol's work—are smaller than the cows, and appear lower in the composition, as if the animals are perhaps meant to be the more important subject matter. Closer to the top of the painting, three large frogs are seated astride each cow. Although their size and the hyperextension of their legs may appear implausibly exaggerated, nevertheless we know that frogs are common creatures, which are particularly plentiful in rice paddies, grass fields, and other environments in which cows may often be found. Their presence in this picture—a scene which is at once familiar and fantastical—redoubles the sense of the natural world, or Oototol's world, as being populated

¹ The artist we know as Oototol was born with the name Dewa Raram, sometime in the 20th century. He lived in Pengosekan, in southern Bali, from the 1990s until his death in 2008.

² Patrick D. Flores, "Address of Art: Vicinity of Region, Horizon of History," in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, ed. Low Sze Wee and Patrick D. Flores (National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 12.

³ Oototol lived and worked in Pengosekan with artists Murni (I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih, 1966–2006), Mokoh (Dewa Putu Mokoh, 1934–2010), and Mondo (Edmondo Zanolini, b. 1951). In a review of an exhibition of works by the four artists (held at Gajah Gallery, Jakarta, in 2024), one critic characterizes them as a "commune-like group" who together "made art and formed a space to explore their fantasies, trauma, and subconscious" in a kind of "collective dreaming." See: Adeline Chia, "MuMoToMo," *e-flux Criticism*, December 19, 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/646941/mumotomo>. See also: Jean Couteau, "Mokoh and Oototol: A Brief Introduction," in *Celebrating Murni* (Sudakara Art Space, Ketemu Project, 2016), 30–31.

⁴ Adrian Vickers, "Oototol in Balinese Art," unpublished essay, commissioned by Gajah Gallery, 2025. See also: Harry Burke, press release for *Oototol: Luar Negeri*, an exhibition held at the Cc Foundation, Shanghai, from November 12, 2025 to April 5, 2026, unpaginated.

⁵ Enjoying my feelings of bewilderment, during the writing of this essay I have deliberately refrained from contacting the people who knew the late artist. I mean no disrespect by this. On the contrary, I have chosen this path with the aim of responding to Oototol's artworks themselves, rather than stories or memories about him. Interviews with Oototol's contemporaries will, however, undoubtedly be an important area for future research on the artist.

⁶ I discuss kinship in a forthcoming book: *Artistic Art Histories in Southeast Asia: Modernisms in Contemporary Practices* (Cornell University Press, 2026). Self-birth and the stray are concepts I am musing on for future projects.

⁷ All works are untitled and dated circa mid-1990s–2008.

⁸ Barbara Creed, *Stray: Human–Animal Ethics in the Anthropocene* (Power Publications, 2017), 80–81.

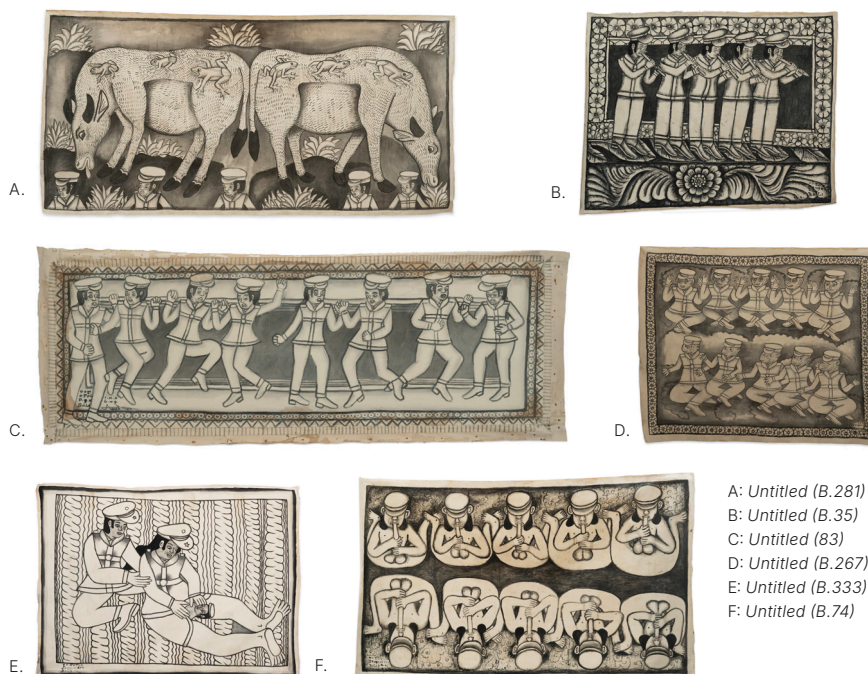
by creatures which live harmoniously, as if like friends, lovers, and family.

Given the sheer variety of compositions in Oototol's vast oeuvre (the artist is said to have completed several hundred paintings), I hesitate to describe this painting as typical of his work. In its dazzling multiplicity, Oototol's practice evades such generalizations. Yet there are several features in the abovementioned image which recur throughout the late artist's oeuvre.

First and most obvious is the artist's use of Chinese ink to create black-and-white pictures with a sumptuous array of grays, but without colors. The widely-cited scholar of Balinese painting, Adrian Vickers, has discussed the prevalence of black-and-white styles across the island, particularly in the practices of artists working in the villages of Batuan and Sanur during and after the 1930s.⁹ The possibility that Batuan and Sanur painting may have inspired Oototol has been noted again recently, as has the affinity of his works with Chinese ink painting and other forms.¹⁰ All this is intriguing, insofar as it suggests Oototol to have possessed a cosmopolitan sensibility, able to creatively combine several styles of painting from across Bali and beyond.

But what are the effects of the consistently black-and-white palette on our understanding of Oototol's oeuvre? In formal terms, the absence of color serves to foreground the compositions of the paintings—their wonderfully weird arrangements of figures, creatures, objects—as well as the artist's deft use of line and shading. But in conceptual or affective terms, the use of black-and-white establishes a kind of immanent equivalence between all the objects and forms of life that Oototol depicts. In the painting discussed above, for instance, the cows, the frogs, the humans, and the plants are distinct, yet clearly connected at some deep ecological or perhaps cosmic level. Whereas color might mark the separateness of the various animals and plants, Oototol's Chinese ink instead hints at the ways in which they are like kin, braided together in his lifeworld.

Another feature in the abovementioned image which recurs in most of Oototol's works is the human figure, with a nearly identical face, almost always dressed in a distinctive hat and uniform. This



A: Untitled (B.281)
 B: Untitled (B.35)
 C: Untitled (83)
 D: Untitled (B.267)
 E: Untitled (B.333)
 F: Untitled (B.74)

attire might be military, or (it has been suggested) it might be a reference or homage to President Sukarno.¹¹ But might it also (I wonder) be a kind of costume? The uniform recalls, for instance, the early days of Indorock, resembling the suits worn by performers such as The Tielman Brothers and The Bintangs, bands which were popular during the 1960s, during Oototol's youth.¹² This fanciful notion allows me to see the human figures as like larger-than-life characters, acting out various (sometimes fantastical) roles in the paintings. In one work [Image B], we see five musicians in uniform. In another, [Image C] eight figures dance with arms and legs raised in a frivolity that belies their impassive facial expressions. In general, these paintings are festive rather than violent in their mood.

Just as I begin to feel secure in the notion that Oototol's paintings might convey a comfortable kinship between humans and other animals, though, I am startled by an exception, which appears almost like a glitch in the artist's oeuvre. Like many glitches, it is magical and revealing. Whereas in most paintings, human figures wear uniforms, in one work [Image D], ten uniformed creatures appear instead to be monkeys.

This underscores that the kinship Oototol imagines is unsteady and uncomfortable, perhaps queer or incoherent. It may be an example of "kincoherence," a neologism coined by

scholars Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman to convey the incoherence and instability of various forms of kinship, including relationships between the human and nonhuman. Bradway and Freeman posit that "kinship is kincoherent: fungible and intractable, disestablished and sanctioned, dispersed and consolidated, its idioms simultaneously symptomatic and performative, sedimented with historical forces and yet capable of cracking open new fault lines in the social body."¹³ With this succession of apparent contradictions, they suggest that kinship forges ties that are bewildering, much like the relationships portrayed in Oototol's paintings.

Self-birth

Oototol even conjures a kind of kincoherent kinship which strays into the Hindu-Buddhist concept of *svayambhu*: the self-existing or self-born. In one painting [Image E], we see three human figures. At first glance, it appears to portray a woman as she gives birth, with a man by her side. Yet these three figures—the man, woman, and child—all have identical facial features, and all wear the same uniform and hat.

This is at once a scene of childbirth, and a scene of self-birth. Because all three figures are alike in appearance, the man and woman appear less like a couple and more like two avatars of the

⁹ Adrian Vickers, *Balinese Art: Paintings and Drawings of Bali 1800–2010* (Tuttle, 2012), 135–157.

¹⁰ Burke, press release.

¹¹ Jean Couteau links Oototol's depictions of hats to Sukarno's signature songkok. Couteau, "Mokoh and Oototol," 31. The style of the hat does however vary, notably in both its brim and crown structure.

¹² Lutgard Mutsaers, "Indorock: An Early Eurorock Style," *Popular Music* 9, no. 3 (1990): 307–320. Jean Couteau claims that Oototol was born during the Japanese occupation. Couteau, "Mokoh and Oototol," 31.

¹³ Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction: Kincoherence/Kin-aesthetics/Kinematics," in *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, ed. Teagan Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman (Duke University Press, 2022), 10.



G: *Untitled (B.261) & Untitled (B. 263)*
 H: *Untitled (149) & Untitled (025)*
 I: *Untitled 81*
 J: *Untitled B.246*
 K: *Untitled B.328*

same being or two versions of the same self, while the infant appears to have auto-replicated, to have given birth to himself. As is typical of *svayambhu* or self-birth, "father and son are effectively interchangeable," both blessed and cursed with an "always already doomed claim to the unique origin."¹⁴ There is something extraordinary about this scene of self-birth, but also something exhausting, as if the figures are trapped in an endlessly repeating loop.

As the scholar Ashley Thompson suggests, self-birth enables a divinity or royal figure to be "at once of a pure lineage and without lineage."¹⁵ This bewildering paradox may also describe Oototol. He comes to us, today, with the esteemed lineage of having worked alongside the celebrated artists Murni, Mokoh, and Mondo in Pengosekan. And yet, since so little is known for sure of his early life or education, Oototol also comes to us as an outsider, as if without lineage at all. In this sense, the artist carries a burden that also begets its own liberation. The painting described above—the scene of childbirth that is also a kind of self-birth—seems to dramatize the artist's peculiar position of both interdependence on his creative community, and peerless singularity.

The work may also be a kind of allegory for the act of painting. Vickers explains that in Bali, often "artists and texts talk about 'giving life' in the artistic process."¹⁶ Perhaps Oototol is giving life

to himself by giving life to his painting. He is the man, the woman, and the child; he is the ink and the canvas; he is human, animal, and divine. The repetition of forms—including human and other animal figures—in many of Oototol's paintings suggests a kind of auto-replication. The multiplicity of people and creatures animates the paintings, imbuing them with a sense of dynamic movement and energy. It is as if each figure creates the next, such that the composition gives birth to itself.

One painting [Image F] even depicts ten figures—nude except for the trademark Oototol hat—engaged in autofellatio, a sexual act which is anatomically impossible for humans, but common enough in other animals. I'm reminded, here, of Farah Wardani's suggestion that for Murni (the artist with whom Oototol lived and worked), "painting acts like masturbation ... The body reclaims itself by copulating with each of its parts."¹⁷ The costume-like uniform and hat is so ubiquitous in Oototol's human figures as to have become like a part of the body. It, too, replicates itself.

Stray

Given his decision to live and paint at odds with mainstream norms, perhaps Oototol may be considered a kind of stray. I do not use this term with any derogatory intent. On the contrary, following the scholar Barbara Creed, I

recognize that "to some, living on the fringe is a shameful thing" yet like Creed I reject this view. Creed continues: "to others, living as an outsider is the only moral response left in a world committed to uniformity."¹⁸ We cannot know Oototol's motivations for living in the way he did, but we can celebrate the effect of his choices, including on his art, which steadfastly evades uniformity, even as it obsessively centers on uniform depictions of uniformed figures. Despite their recurrent attire and repeated form, these uniformed figures are also like strays, refusing to conform to expectations or norms. As Vickers notes, Oototol's work is quite unlike the contemporary art that dominates the art market today.¹⁹ Like many artists before him, Oototol seems to "have placed great inspirational value on straying." Creed notes that such deviation from "the normal path" can be "challenging," yet she also cites a long list of artists for whom straying has been a way to avoid "stagnating in a settled, bourgeois life."²⁰ Oototol's art, too, is challenging. But in its bewildering strangeness, it steadfastly evades stagnation.

Strays are related to concepts of kinship because they reveal the interdependence of humans and other animals. In two of Oototol's paintings [Image G], small, possibly stray animals lay in wait beneath a dining table, as if hoping for some stray scraps of food to be passed to them by the humans who feast above them. In the first of these two works, a dog—well-endowed with enlarged, leonine paws—turns its head backwards to gaze at a plate of fish, and past this, at a woman who seems to be floating in mid-air. In a second painting, two cats grin with profuse pleasure, while the humans above them are impassively unmoved. If these animals are strays, dependent on the humans for food, they nevertheless appear to enjoy a rich life.

The tables are turned, so to speak, in two other paintings [Image H] which depict the act of breastfeeding. In these works, it is wholly unclear which if any of the figures depicted are human or animal. With their attenuated, upturned eyes and fingers, the figures resemble dancers, or perhaps mythical beings depicted in wayang paintings and other classical works of art. It may be that these figures are neither human, nor animal, but rather divine, or simply

¹⁴ Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (Routledge, 2016), 100.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, 41.

¹⁶ Vickers, *Balinese Art*, 21.

¹⁷ Farah Wardani, *Dekonstruksi Jender dalam Teks dan Praktik Seni Rupa: Perempuan Sebagai Tanda* [Gender Deconstruction in Texts and Art Practices: Women as Signs], quoted in translation in Wulan Dirgantoro, "Interrogating the Feminine in Indonesian Modern and Contemporary Art," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 3, no. 1 (2019): 106.

¹⁸ Creed, *Stray*, 17.

¹⁹ Vickers, "Oototol."

fictive. It may be that these figures are strays, who bewilder us with their ability to “cross over from human to nonhuman.”²¹ They violate the imagined distinctions separating one species from another.

This incoherence of the category of the species goes beyond the kincoherence of kinship, described above, and is instead suggestive of what the scholar Donna Haraway calls “the dance linking kin and kind.”²² Deconstructing the historical invention of the concept of the species, Haraway explains matter-of-factly that “the ability to interbreed reproductively is the rough and ready requirement for members of the same biological species.”²³ Haraway questions the viability of this conceptualization of difference. She observes that many kinds of creatures such as bacteria are not easily encompassed within available species categories. Moreover, she argues that the discourse of “endangered species,” although it may appear to be a well-meaning call for preservation, can also function “simultaneously to locate value and to evoke death and extinction in ways familiar in colonial representations of the always vanishing indigene.”²⁴ By linking human attitudes to nonhuman animals with the violence of colonial thought, Haraway reveals the high stakes involved in any imagination of kinship between creatures.

Strays—perhaps like Oototol, and perhaps like the figures he conjures in his paintings—resist the colonial fantasy that cleaves humans from other animals, and instead take seriously various embodied, intuitive, and discrepant ways of knowing. Discussing Creed’s theory of the stray, one scholar proposes that it might “resist positioning the nonhuman as *mere* object of looking and knowledge.”²⁵ Art, she suggests, might “remind us that we *are* already ecological, that is, already enmeshed in the environment.”²⁶ Figures—those ambiguous creatures depicted in art—might be reimagined as more than “a mere representation of something, but

rather [as] a creature that is both human and animal, natural and cultural, real and imagined.”²⁷

Artists who inhabit spaces outside the mainstream—whether because they are self-taught, stylistically idiosyncratic, or otherwise straying from norms—have played a transformative role in Southeast Asia’s contemporary and modern art. Such figures are enjoying renewed attention in recent years, in both scholarly and curatorial settings.²⁸ As I have argued elsewhere, weirdness can be a beguiling quality in any artist’s practice, and it is one which is often most prized by more canonical artists.²⁹

Art like Oototol’s, after all, need not be constrained by convention, or by the limitations of the colonial imagination. Why shouldn’t a figure be a man, and also a woman, and a child, and a monkey, and a dog, and a lion, and even a divinity? Why shouldn’t a person—an artist—give birth to themselves?

This is bewildering, to be sure, but it is also liberating. The pervasive pessimism many of us feel today, heralded by the climate crisis and late capitalism, means that (in Creed’s words) “the human species is in danger of becoming a stray unto itself.” Yet Creed finds “one beacon of hope,” namely “the interrelatedness, resilience and inventiveness of all species.”³⁰ Reading these lines for the first time, I wondered what Creed might be imagining. Rereading these lines with Oototol’s art as my guide and companion, I find myself bewildered anew.

Vehicles traversing Oototol’s world

Many of Oototol’s paintings are signed not only with the artist’s chosen name, but also with his village (Pengosekan), his island (Bali), his nation (Indonesia), and the words *luar negery* (sometimes abbreviated as LNY).³¹ The phrase is a misspelling of *luar negeri*, a common phrase which literally means “outside the country” and is usually translated

as “overseas.” Vickers has suggested that through the obsessively recurring imagery in his paintings, Oototol “tried to communicate a world that was specific to the village of Pengosekan, and somehow global in its vision.”³²

How might we navigate these divergent scales of affiliation and imagination? For this daunting and bewildering mission, Oototol offers us an abundance of vehicles. His world is populated not only by humans in uniforms, and animals, and mythical creatures, and fantastical scenes, but also with an array of different modes of transport. Humans are the vehicles carrying cats, in one work [Image I]. A cow is a vehicle carrying humans, in another [Image J]. Cows are also vehicles carrying frogs, in the painting described near the beginning of this essay. In other works, we see elephants, dragons or alligators, sea creatures, airplanes, trucks, penny farthing bicycles, motorcycles, deer, cars, becak, and even surfboards [Image K] all serving as vehicles.

The painting of the surfboards is particularly bewildering. Four human figures, dressed characteristically in uniforms and hats, stand on these surfboards with their arms akimbo. Are they dancing? Are they lifting their arms to maintain their balance on the turbulent waves? Are their postures mimicking those depicted in puppets and wayang paintings? Are they waving to one another, as if to communicate across the sea? Are these even surfboards, or are they tiny islands, in a vaster archipelago?

I am bewildered, I do not know, I do not understand. But I feel comfortable in this commotion of confusion and reassured by all these paintings of vehicles. They seem to offer the possibility that Oototol’s paintings will carry us through the bewilderment, that they will guide us to find our kin, that they will offer sanctuary for strays, and that they will be vessels to ferry our thinking and our imagination. By leading us astray, these paintings may lead us to exactly where we need to be.

²⁰ Creed, *Stray*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, “Stray aesthetic in the cinema of Andrea Arnold,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 15, no. 1 (2023): 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 n. 4.

²⁸ See, for example, scholarship on the self-taught artist Svay Ken (1933–2008), hailed as a pioneer of contemporary art in Cambodia: Pamela N. Corey, “The ‘First’ Cambodian Contemporary Artist,” *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2014): 61–94. See also scholarship on Tang Chang (1934–1990), who despite being a self-styled outsider, also had a great impact on generations of artists in Thailand: Nawapoo Sae-tang, Wahyuni Masyidah binti Md Isa, and Simon Soon, “The Outsider Artist in Thai Modern Art: A Study of Tang Chang (1934–1990),” *Tirai Panggung* 21, no. 1 (2025): 1–18. See also the exhibition, “*Misfits*”: *Pages from a loose-leaf modernity*, curated by David Teh for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, in 2017.

²⁹ Roger Nelson, “Emiria Sunassa’s Citational Paintings: ‘Like a Boil on a Virgin’s Lips,’” *Oxford Art Journal* 46, no. 3 (2023): 424–425.

³⁰ Creed, *Stray*, 168.

³¹ Burke, press release.

³² Vickers, “Oototol.”